

Report to the  
Faculty, Administration, Trustees, Students  
of  
BENNINGTON COLLEGE  
Bennington, Vermont

An Evaluation Team representing the  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education  
of the  
New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Prepared after study of the institution's  
self-evaluation report and a visit to  
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## INTRODUCTION

The Visiting Committee found Bennington to be unique and successful. The College is devoted to teaching in fields of talent and creativity often left untaught by other colleges. Further, Bennington is committed to teaching its curriculum in a very personal and very demanding fashion. The members of the Committee feel strongly that an association of colleges and universities should cherish the uniqueness of Bennington and not attempt to force its program into a more common mold. Faculty and students alike at Bennington agree that the educational program there is highly successful. The intent of this report is to nourish the success of that program, not to urge conformity to a norm.

The Committee experienced great difficulty in evaluating Bennington because a new president has been in office for only a year after a period of considerable turmoil. Time after time the same answer was given to questions coming from members of the Visiting Committee. A Bennington faculty or staff member would reply to an inquiry that a real problem existed in a given area and that under the leadership of the new president steps were being taken to deal with that problem. The Committee is convinced that problems have been identified and that there is every reason to believe that many of them will be addressed. However, the Committee left the campus with a strong sense of the tasks which need to be done in the next few years and with an equally strong sense of our inability to measure good intentions against concrete results. The Committee notes that the last review of Bennington occurred just after a previous president took office. It is the view of the Committee that this timing of visits is not wise.

## OBJECTIVES

All constituents of the Bennington community have a clear sense of the purpose of the College and the educational methods used to achieve that purpose. The awareness of the unique purpose of Bennington is strong throughout the community and is the coherent force around which the College functions. Initiation into the "Bennington experience" is the major theme of student life. Each student learns that he must shoulder a major share of the responsibility for planning his own academic program and that burden is very demanding, indeed too demanding for some students who matriculate. The survivors among the students share with the faculty a pride in the rich fruits of the "Bennington experience." To a degree which exceeds the norm at other colleges and universities, there is a shared awareness of educational goals at Bennington and this shared awareness is an important strength of the College. The academic program implements these goals successfully.

## ORGANIZATION AND CONTROL

The fact of turmoil at Bennington in recent years has been well advertised in the media. The Committee attempted to assess the impact

of this turmoil on the educational program at Bennington. First, the Committee can report without hesitation that the turmoil never interrupted the instructional program. Faculty and students agree that no classes were cancelled, no programs disrupted, no standards were lowered. Whatever else may have happened at the College, the educational program continued uninterrupted.

What then was the import of the turmoil? The Committee inquired if the turmoil was merely the product of personality clashes or if larger structural problems in governance had led to conflict. Granted that personalities played a role, the Committee does not think it accurate to dismiss the problems of that era with the easy assurance that more compatible personalities have arrived on the scene. Structural problems exist and need to be addressed.

One faculty member summarized a widely held faculty view by saying that the new president was fine because "he understands the limits of presidential authority." To this faculty member that statement meant that all educational policy and responsibility for innovation lies in the hands of the faculty. By implication, this view holds that the president and other administrators are without responsibility for or power of initiative in regard to the educational program. The Committee is not persuaded that this view of the role of the president and his administrative associates serves the long term interests of the College or, indeed, of the faculty itself.

The faculty are divided into six Divisions and Divisional secretaries, not Divisional chairmen, are named for each unit. The Committee has grave doubts that this pattern of Divisional secretaries is wise. They seem to play a minor role in budgeting and little seems to be expected of them with regard to assuring coherence in the methods and goals of instruction in each Division. The result is that these responsibilities fall on the Faculty Educational Policy Committee and on the administration. It would seem appropriate for the faculty to ask if a somewhat stronger definition of the role of Divisional secretaries might help each Division and the College in planning and implementing the educational program. For example, faculty in the Division of Science and Mathematics are restive about the place of their program in the offerings of the College but do not seem to have articulated successfully their concerns and hopes to faculty colleagues or to the administration. Stronger Divisional organization might help them to do so.

Governance at Bennington is kept to a minimum and when it is permitted as a necessary evil, the procedures are very democratic. Faculty election plays a major role in the selection of deans. The secretaries of Divisions have very limited powers. Just as each student is asked to take much of the responsibility for planning his program, each faculty member is given much autonomous space in which to teach and carry on his professional activity. In the words of one administrator, until the present, Bennington has been "essentially unmanaged."

The Committee is not convinced that more orderly governance and

management are incompatible with the educational goals and methods of Bennington. To the contrary, the Committee is quite convinced that if the College continues to drift in an "unmanaged" condition, the strength and vitality of the educational program may suffer. Specific examples of this concern are cited throughout the report.

Even within the present system, misunderstandings of governance procedures and outcomes abound. At least ten members of the faculty assured members of the Visiting Committee that they knew nothing of the institutional self-study and had never participated in its completion. The major issues treated in the self-study were reviewed for a year and a half in faculty meetings as well as in the Faculty Educational Policy Committee. Or to cite another example, the science faculty protested that the administration and an energy committee planned to close their facility for the Non Resident Term without consulting them. In point of fact, one of their group sat on the energy committee. The Visiting Committee would only observe that the patterns of governance at Bennington are exceedingly democratic; faculty and students have a broad range of power and consultation in the process. Given that fact, it is difficult to understand why the outcomes of a participatory governance process are described as ill-considered and oppressive edicts. [It seems that the opportunities to share in decision making abound much more than does a willingness to accept the results of that process.]

The Committee was impressed with a great lack of continuity in the Bennington administration. Since a previous committee visited, one president completed a term, there was an interim period, another president completed a brief term, another interim followed and a new president is in office. Other administrative officers have served short terms. This turnover of personnel may be evaluated positively especially in an institution which emphasizes a democratic governing process. However, the Visiting Committee feels that the lack of continuity has created problems at the College. Some administrators do not seem to have a complete grasp of information relevant to their responsibilities and a sense of the evolution of those responsibilities over time.

The Director of Admissions is preoccupied with the task of filling each Freshman class and the Dean of Studies carries an enormous load of academic counseling and oversight of programs. Neither has had the opportunity to study the problem of the large number of students who resign from Bennington. They will be unable to do so unless they have sufficiently long terms in their respective offices. Similarly, continuity in the Office of the Dean of Faculty can help provide continuity in educational planning. In general, the Committee feels that more continuity can be maintained within the College without stifling opportunities for educational initiative.

Because of concern about governance, the Visiting Committee asked that representatives of the Trustees be available throughout the visit, not just for Sunday dinner. The availability of the Trustees greatly facilitated the work of the Committee. From discussions with two trustees, the Committee finds them aware of both personal and structural problems which created controversy in recent years. The Trustees



are knowledgeable about their College and appreciative of the strength and momentum generated by a new administration. While attempting to resolve controversies, the Trustees became too involved in the administration of the College and, as a result, they have a strong sense of a division of power between the Board and campus administration. They share with their campus constituencies an enthusiastic affirmation of the unique goals and methods of Bennington. Finally, they realize that the maintenance of excellence at Bennington requires a vast increase in annual giving to the College as well as a successful capital campaign.

### ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Two facts characterize the academic program at Bennington, the emphasis on instruction in the fine and performing arts and the requirement that each student shoulder much of the burden for his own curricular planning. This program is very demanding of the time and energy of faculty and students alike. Bennington enjoys a student-faculty ratio of approximately 8.5 to 1 but the ideal of personalized education creates an insatiable demand for faculty time. The emphasis on the fine and performing arts had led the College to find methods which are different from those appropriate to the lecture hall and science laboratory. The program in fine and performing arts is not a marginal comment on an otherwise more traditional curriculum. Rather, faculty in the arts play a very important role setting the tone and the policy of the College.

#### The Performing and Visual Arts

There are four Divisions in the performing arts--Music, Drama, Dance, and Black Music--and there is a Division of the Visual Arts. All of the arts are studied as contemporary expressions, and for the insight they afford into the cultures of the past. In each Division of the performing arts, students are involved in performance and composition. Students work on the level appropriate to their previous experience and individual abilities rather than by their year in college. During each term, a series of productions, based on activities in studios and workshops is an essential part of the teaching plan. The Visual Arts student demonstrates ability in at least two media through exhibitions of representative work.

In the Music Division, the program requires the interaction of composition and vocal and instrumental study. Techniques, such as theory and harmony are taught through composition--the study of which begins in the student's first year. For advanced work in Music, the Division's two essential requirements are a substantial representation of advanced work in both performance and composition.

The Dance Division emphasizes practical work in choreography and performance. During the first two years, a Dance student participates in composition or performance plus technique classes. An advanced Dance student participates in composition or performance plus technique and can pursue his or her special interest through tutorials. All Dance Division students participate in production crews each term.

The Drama program develops actors, directors, playwrights, and designers. It offers students the opportunity to explore Drama as a part of their Liberal Arts education through performance classes, workshops, and productions. Drama is taught as a performing art rather than an academic subject. Students study Dramatic Literature through the Literature Division.

The Black Music Division has been in existence for only five years. It covers areas in Music not covered in the Music Division. There is no Major in this Division; students pursue inter-divisional work (usually in Music), one-half of which can be in Black Music. A senior recital is not mandatory. The impetus for the initiation of this program came largely from the faculty members involved. Inquiries from prospective students about the program are on the increase and the program has gained international recognition.

In the Visual Arts Division, a freshman is limited to two terms and is involved in Introduction to Art as well as studio classes in 2D and 3D Art. At the same time, they are involved in three other areas. The acceptance of a Major in Visual Arts involves a review of work. Approximately 20 students are accepted as Majors into the Junior class and 16 - 24 are graduated as Art Majors. The only problem which the Secretary of the Visual Arts Division cited was the lack of a position for the Director of the Division's Museum.

The faculty of all of the Arts Divisions are professional artists in their own right. This accounts for a student product which is competently professionally oriented and protects each program against "dilettantism." It is expected that after graduation, professionally motivated students will seek intensive further professional training in the art of their choice.

### The Science and Mathematics Division

The science and mathematics division at Bennington occupies a role often assigned to Fine Arts programs at other colleges. Without extensive staff or offerings, the Division plays a supporting role to other strong Divisions.

During the past decade the program of this Division has been strengthened so that the concern of the last Visiting Committee need not resurface. The new science facility is adequate to the needs of the present program and much more. In addition to offerings in general education, the Division prepares a significant number of students for graduate study in science and medicine. Good students from Bennington are accepted for graduate study without difficulty.

The relevant question regarding this Division is not if it has sufficient strength to play a supporting role but how much it can grow beyond that role. The Committee found that the faculty of this Division have not stated clearly their hopes for building strength. The present debate about a replacement appointment--whether it should continue to be a permanent biologist or whether it should now rotate within the Division--is a small part of a more comprehensive concern for the Division. A plan for the future of the Division which allocates

faculty time to general education on the one hand and to time for more advanced work for majors and pre-professional students on the other hand would provide a standard against which alternative plans for appointments can be measured.

### Social Sciences

The division of Social Science includes fourteen full-time faculty members, of whom six hold the Ph.D. degree, and two part-time faculty members, both with the Ph.D. About half the faculty have published scholarly work, although very few have published books. The social science faculty ordinarily suffer somewhat from the isolation from disciplinary colleagues typical of faculty in small colleges; there are three psychologists, three philosophers, two historians, two political scientists, two economists, two anthropologists, and two people in early childhood education. Although they do not attempt to offer straight disciplinary majors, each faculty member is called upon to offer an extremely wide range of courses; as many as ten or eleven different courses are listed in the catalogue for some faculty members over a two-year period. If they actually attempt to do that, the inability to publish is understandable. Most faculty members teach two courses each term, and also give small-group tutorials and direct independent study, as well as serving as academic counselors for six to ten students.

The division of Social Sciences includes Anthropology, Early Childhood, Economics, History, Philosophy, Politics, and Psychology. Students majoring in the Social Sciences generally include at least two disciplines and sometimes more. Their work includes a required senior thesis, usually supervised by one faculty member with an additional reader from a second discipline. While there are occasionally team-taught courses, most of the integration among disciplines is done by the students, with the help of their counselors. An introductory course in social theory is taught by faculty members from various disciplines in turn; while not a "required" course for the major it is strongly encouraged for first-year students. It emphasizes the development of analytical and critical faculties by dealing with primary materials rather than with scholarly interpretations.

While no courses are offered in "education," as such, one faculty member offers courses in "early childhood," which are taken by students interested in education. Philosophy, traditionally included in Humanities divisions, is at Bennington included in the Social Sciences, although the emphasis does not seem to be on political philosophy. History is also in the Social Sciences. Sociology is not included as a discipline, although some of the areas of concern to sociologists are treated by the philosophers (alienation) and psychologists (socialization, race and sex, social psychology); the decision was made some years ago to have two anthropologists rather than to increase the number of disciplines to include sociology.

Overall, the Social Science program looks strong for such a small faculty. The insistence on interdisciplinary majors appears wise because of the limited number of faculty in any one discipline.



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There is a potential problem for the student because of the large number of courses listed in the catalog which may not be offered within any particular two or three year period, although the catalog does include a disclaimer that "the curriculum at Bennington College is constantly changing and the courses included in this catalog are meant to give an indication of what is taught at the College."

### Literature and Languages

Fifteen full-time faculty members offer courses in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish literature, and workshops in verse and prose writing. The major requires eight courses in the last two years at the intermediate and advanced level, including a senior thesis which is either a critical essay or an original work. The division tends to be overenrolled and requires serious commitment from students who wish to major; not all prospective majors are accepted by the division. Writing workshops are limited in size and permission to enroll is usually based on submission of samples of written work.

Students who concentrate in French, German, Russian or Spanish literature do part of their work in tutorials and independent reading projects; each is urged to spend one or two terms studying abroad during the junior year, which helps to overcome the possible disadvantages of having only one faculty member at Bennington in German, Russian and Spanish literature, and two in French. We did not determine how many students each year major in one of these areas (data were given only for the whole division), but presumably the number is small.

Seven of the fifteen full-time faculty hold the Ph.D.; a few of them and a number of the others are published writers, as are the three of the four part-time faculty. Although most appear to concentrate either on literature or writing, several teach both areas. While two faculty teach French, there is only one each in German, Russian, Spanish, and Greek. Distinguished American authors grace the Bennington faculty of American Literature and attract to Bennington students with motivation and talent to follow in their steps.

### The Non Resident Term

Although the Non Resident Term has been an integral part of the philosophy of education at Bennington and has thus occupied a large part of the academic calendar, until this past year it has not received the attention it has needed. But with the hiring of a full-time NRT Director and the commitment of additional funds to the office, the College has signaled a revitalization of this aspect of the curriculum. Indeed, the NRT has been taken into the academic wing of the College. The new director is energetically seeking not only new, solid positions, both paid and volunteer, but she is also consciously tying NRT opportunities to career interest of Bennington students. The organization of the NRT office and the use students are making of it attest to the importance of the NRT in the eyes of the College. There is significant potential here.



## Evaluation of Student Work

The fact that Bennington has neither a traditional grading system nor a quantitative standard for awarding the degree concerned some members of the Committee before they arrived on campus. During the visit, this concern was answered. There is no question in the minds of the Committee that evaluation of student work is rigorous and fair. Likewise, students are not automatically awarded the degree after four years of residence. Students are in effect "admitted" from lower level college work to programs in concentration. That review which normally occurs after two years is vigorous and meaningful and the standards for awarding the Bachelor's Degree are comparable with those at other colleges. Contrary to some popular stereotypes, the academic program at Bennington is neither quixotic nor without rigor.

Science faculty are concerned that the decision to abolish grades may harm students who apply for graduate study in their area. If the option of taking grades is not restored, students in the sciences must be taught strategies needed to overcome any handicap incurred because of the unique transcript.

Written evaluations of all course work are provided by the instructors, and become part of the student's transcript portfolio. The evaluation forms provide a space for the instructor to check passing, not passing, or incomplete. As in most colleges which use narrative evaluations, the quality of the evaluations is variable. When they are well-done (clearly written, critical, informative) the transcript portfolio is an impressive document. (The Registrar's Office retypes the evaluations for the transcript, which is time-consuming for them but very helpful to the reader.) Where they are poor, the transcript is hard to interpret and can appear almost fraudulent. On the small number of student records we examined, the social science, natural science and humanities faculty appeared to be doing more thorough and informative evaluations than some of those in the Visual and Performing Arts. The Dean of Studies and Assistant Dean of Studies may, and sometimes do, question inadequate evaluations and ask the faculty member to revise them.

We were informed by the Registrar that most faculty do turn in the required evaluations on time. The policy is enforced by the withholding of the final paycheck of the term until all the evaluations are in.

The Committee has some doubts about the implementation of the evaluation system although no doubt is expressed about the principle of each evaluation system. A review of evaluations on file in the Registrar's Office suggests that practice does not always correspond with principle. When the evaluations were for internal purposes only, backed up by a "shadow" grading system for outside use, the lack of information about a student's performance in a course may not have been crucial. Now that the evaluation is the only thing a student has to show to the outside world about the work in a course, it is important for faculty to learn how to write evaluations which do in fact evaluate the work done, and for an official of the

College to have the authority to question evaluations which do not do that. At least one evaluation appeared not only non-informative but also totally inappropriate; we were informed that the Dean of Studies has asked the faculty member to rewrite it, but it has gone into the official transcript unchanged. In another case, the transcript showed a course as "passed" when the evaluation form showed that it was "incomplete" because, the faculty member stated, "I have no sense of this student in the course." The latter appeared to be a simple error of transcribing; it was brought to the attention of the Assistant Dean, who said it would be corrected. Still another transcript carried a notation after a grade of "A", "This professor gives A grades to all students." It is not clear who is empowered to make such notations on transcripts.

The evaluation system compounds the chances for such errors at any college. Bennington does have a monitoring system which is generally good. The need appears to be for a more thorough and general understanding on the part of the faculty of the ways in which the evaluations will be used outside the College and of the problems that can occur.

#### General Education and the Major Program

Bennington students are required to fulfill a distribution requirement by pursuing work in four of the eight divisions--Literature and Languages, Social Science, Natural Science and Mathematics, Black Music, Dance, Drama, Music, and Visual Arts--during their first two years, and to complete one year's work beyond the introductory level in three disciplines. Because five of the Divisions are in the Visual and Performing Arts, the evaluation team was concerned that students might fulfill the distribution requirements by a rather narrow range of work within the arts. We were assured that the academic counselors and Educational Counseling Committee do not allow that to happen, and the sample of records we looked at seem to indicate that arts students do in fact usually include at least two of the areas of humanities, social science, and natural science in their programs, and that social science and science students often do significant amounts of work in humanities and the arts.

The major is developed by students with their academic counselors during their fourth term; the tentative plan must be accepted by the division or divisions in which the work is to be done; it is also presented to the Dean of Studies, who refers questionable cases to the Educational Counseling Committee. The tentative plan lays out proposed courses and independent reading or tutorials in the major; by the end of the third year students must submit a confirmation of plan which includes any changes in courses and also a plan for the senior thesis or project required by most divisions. Divisions may not require more than fourteen courses for a major; no student is permitted to take more than twenty-two (of a total of thirty-two) courses in a division without special approval of the Educational Counseling Committee. The tentative plans are not automatically accepted by every division. Especially in areas like creative writing and some of the arts, students may be turned down by one division and need to present alternative plans for a major. Sometimes conditions

for the retention of academic good standing are attached at the tentative plan stage.

### Comparative Standards and Programs

At times, the shared sense of unique goals and methods in the academic program at Bennington becomes so great a virtue that it is very nearly a vice. Some Bennington faculty refuse to deal with any questions involving comparisons of the Bennington program with that at other colleges. According to this view, the Bennington program has unique goals, unique methods and unique standards for evaluating the success of those methods. Put succinctly, the College is incomparable. This view leads to an unnecessary parochialism especially in a time when more and more Bennington students are spending a term or a year of study elsewhere. The faculty might ask if there are not ways to compare their standards at Bennington with standards elsewhere not in order to make Bennington conform to more traditional patterns but rather to ensure that the uniqueness of Bennington is a uniqueness of excellence not a uniqueness of isolated mediocrity.

Already many students choose to study elsewhere for a semester or a year. A formal exchange arrangement with a large university would assist students who seek instruction in areas not offered at Bennington and would offer a structured basis for comparison of programs at Bennington and other institutions. In any case, a review of options available to students for study elsewhere seems appropriate. A list prepared for the Visiting Committee indicated that thirteen of those eighty-four students Bennington expects to graduate in June, 1978 studied away from Bennington. Perhaps a well organized College approved and College advocated series of study opportunities elsewhere could raise the percentage of students studying away from 15% while simultaneously reducing the attrition rate of approximately 50%. Bennington Overseas as it is developed, could be part of a larger strategy to provide resources in other cultures and resources of larger American institutions to Bennington undergraduates. Programs of study abroad should be subject to approval by a faculty committee or a dean. Presently, non-accredited, profit-making programs--unacceptable at many other colleges--are approved at Bennington.

### Graduate Programs

Bennington has traditionally offered a few students a Master's Degree in Arts. Most of the previously existing graduate offerings have ground to a halt but new concepts are being developed by the faculty. Presently a plan is under review to institute MFA Programs in Music and Creative Writing. The Committee reports this fact to the Association and instructs the Bennington administration to report to the Association when complete plans for these graduate programs have been developed.

### FACULTY

Just as Bennington has a unique program, it has, appropriately, a unique faculty. Many of the faculty in the Fine and Performing Arts do not have traditional credentials but they participate regularly



in professional activities and they are among the stronger faculty of the College. The faculty in Social Sciences, Science and Mathematics are fewer in number than at most colleges but they are well qualified. All divisions which offer a major have sufficient strength for that purpose and the Science and Mathematics Division, for example have an outstanding record of placing graduates in professional or graduate schools.

The faculty are not paid well by any standards of comparison and both the administration and the Board recognize this fact. During the first year in office, the new president has set as his first priority an increase in faculty compensation. Likewise, fund-raising literature emphasizes the need to increase faculty compensation. The faculty themselves have established a genial and collegial policy that no member of the faculty may be paid more than twice the compensation of faculty at the bottom of the scale. Although this policy is laudable in many ways, it severely limits the options of the administration to seek out the services of senior faculty elsewhere who might add substantially to the instructional program and professional life of the faculty.

After the traditional years of pre-tenure service, a Bennington faculty member may be recommended for "presumptive tenure." This means, in practice, that senior faculty are given five-year renewable contracts. Before a new contract is offered, the performance of the faculty member is reviewed by a faculty committee and by the administration. The commonly held view at the College is that this program is effective. To be sure, no senior faculty have been separated from the College before retirement as a result of this policy. However, the faculty agree that this policy helps to "keep them on their toes."

### STUDENTS

In spite of the sharp decline in number of applicants, the students who matriculate impress the faculty as bright and well motivated. They are largely responsible for managing their own affairs on the campus and they play a significant role in developing educational policy. Nevertheless, the Committee has serious concern regarding college policy and attitude toward students.

### Attrition

The Visiting Committee which reviewed Bennington eleven years ago commented on the high attrition rate and recommended a special study of that problem. An attrition study was conducted in August, 1966. A copy of this study was sent to the chairman of the Visiting Committee after our visit to the campus. At the same time, a brief summation of thirty-three exit interviews conducted in the spring of 1977 was provided. This summation is not a systematic study and draws no conclusions. Copies of both of these studies are appended to the report.

Members of the Committee raised the question of attrition with many faculty and administrators. We did not sense that there was any significant awareness of the 1966 study or that the study resulted

in any action in either admissions or the academic program designed to address the problem of attrition. The 1966 study suggested that the fact that the College was not coeducational was part of the problem. That factor has been changed but the attrition rate at present is nearly the same as that of a decade ago.

Faculty and administrators have anecdotal information; they speak of their "impressions" of the problem. The Visiting Committee was assured that many students leave Bennington in order to pursue areas of study in which the Bennington offering is not sufficiently strong. No one presented us with any concrete data regarding the number of students who leave Bennington in order to continue their education elsewhere in contrast to the number whose departure from Bennington marks the end of higher education. Students told the Committee that the academic program places great responsibility and stress on students and that some cannot cope and leave after the first term. The failure of the College to study systematically the experience of students who leave Bennington strikes the Committee as callous. In order to understand the impact of its program on students, the College needs to study systematically when students leave, why they leave and where they go.

#### Admissions and Financial Aid

Plagued by the double-edged sword of high attrition and a small applicant pool, the new Director of Admissions and Financial Aid faces an uphill battle. Bennington, once a highly selective college, sent out fifteen letters of refusal against four hundred thirty letters of acceptance to the current group of new students, which includes one hundred seventy-one freshmen and forty-four transfer students, for a total enrollment of two hundred fifteen, plus twelve deferred.

The current staff consists of highly motivated professionals who are either new at Bennington, or new in their present positions. Their goals differ from the goals of the past staff; but they haven't had sufficient time to implement their plans.

In order to attract more applicants, additional staff was engaged to establish a national network of recruiter-interviewers who will visit high schools and seek out candidates. Bennington's reputation in arts, music, and literature still elicits many applications. More might be done to display on tour Bennington's achievements in the arts in order to attract students and to reestablish ties with alumni.

Based on available data it appears that the current applicant pool is not rich in diversity. Many students are graduates of private schools and few minority students apply. Funds for financial aid are limited thus inhibiting the search for diversity.

The Committee has the strong impression that the available data regarding applicant pools and matriculated classes is inadequate. Information routinely available at other colleges is not available at Bennington. Without this data, it is impossible for the Committee to assess accurately the admissions picture. It would seem equally difficult for Bennington to make that assessment.

### Student Morale

Despite problems in attracting and retaining students, morale is high on the campus. Students are loyal, even inspired by their College. They are proud of their faculty and appreciate their teachers' devotion to their disciplines and to their students. Despite the exceptionally high faculty-student ratio, the student leaders put their priority on increased salaries as well as added numbers of teaching faculty, rather than on improved student services, fully recognizing the financial problems involved. The most common complaint is the high rate of tuition. A leveling off is much hoped for.

### Student Services and Student Life

Other student services are limited but adequate. The Counseling Service is especially strong. It is staffed by the equivalent of three full-time professionals who refer to local psychiatrists. A limited number of visits to the psychiatrists are covered by the College. The staff is supportive, effective and well organized; they even keep records and supply statistical data in contrast to other offices. To explain the high rate of counselor-student ratio, they point to the intensity of professional demands and the high proportion of creative, self motivated artists.

Bennington makes no promises to entering students of assistance with career counseling and it embraces the philosophy of art for arts sake, as opposed to careerism. Nevertheless, the current administration, attuned to students changing needs, has embarked on limited career counseling. Today, as Bennington's student population includes a significant proportion who are bent on professional careers, career counseling is of higher priority. The Director of Student Services has begun ambitiously to satisfy this need, limited as she is by space and personnel.

Bennington was clearly ahead of its time when it built its dormitories, each designed to accommodate thirty students. In this age of increased student autonomy, this system operates more effectively than do large structures, especially at such a minimally administered college.

The Director and the staff of the Office of Student Services are new in their respective positions, but old hands at Bennington administration. The Director knows the students personally, having served as Director of Admissions. Cooperation and student autonomy are the key words at Bennington; the administrators of Student Services see themselves as ombudsmen, and never as disciplinarians. Each judicial case is handled by a committee of students elected ad hoc for the occasion, with little influence from the administration. Room assignments, policy decisions and other administrative tasks are routinely handled by elected student officials who work closely with



the staff. This system of governance matches Bennington's highly individualized student population as well as its educational policy.

Bennington's cultural activities are greatly enhanced by participating and performing faculty and students. There is great pride in the accomplishments of College talent. The audience is mostly College too; very little effort seems to be made to publicize forthcoming events within the area or at the neighboring schools. There is an excellent literary magazine, a good student paper, both exceeding the expectations one might have of an institution of Bennington's size.

The most popular common room is the new student pub, a facility that has not yet had a chance to prove its effect on students' extra-curricular life. The largest common lounge is a huge anteroom to Commons, to be redecorated, according to the new Director of Student Services, as soon as finances permit. The spacious and elegant dormitory lounges stand in marked contrast to the shabbiness of the common lounge.

One of Bennington's unique features is its relative lack of athletic facilities and its total lack of personnel. This tradition is now being challenged by an unusually athletic group of underclass students. The Director of Student Services recognizes this need, and has embarked on the organization of a limited intramural program. Should demands for physical exercise, and especially for competitive sports increase, Bennington will be faced with the request for additional facilities and personnel.

### Library

The holdings of the library are small even for a college of only 600 students. The present acquisitions budget is not adequate for the needs of the College. The College might consider the appropriateness of setting aside for acquisitions something closer to recommended national norms, namely 5% of the operating budget. At least 90% of the acquisition choices are made by the faculty and sample investigations by the Visiting Committee suggests that the faculty are using the limited acquisitions budget wisely.

Students working in areas where Bennington holdings are inadequate are able to utilize the library at Williams College under an institutional exchange arrangement. The continuation of this arrangement is imperative if Bennington students are to write senior theses in areas where Bennington holdings are insufficient, particularly in Science.

### PHYSICAL FACILITIES

For a college of 600 students, the physical facilities at Bennington range from adequate to excellent. Reading and study space in the library is commodious and attractive. The science facility is handsome and far from crowded. The facility for performing arts provides a physical setting appropriate to the curricular emphasis on that area. Some of the older wood frame structures are difficult to

maintain but they are adequate for the needs of the College.

### FINANCIAL RESOURCES AND MANAGEMENT

The pattern of "minimal management" at Bennington has resulted in a largely unsystematic and discontinuous approach to accounting, record keeping, reporting and planning in areas such as financial management, budget, physical plant and non-academic personnel. The new administration recognizes the nature and scope of the major problems in these areas and has begun to address them. Any assessment of progress can be made only after six months to a year of effort has been invested.

The task is not easy because the College has a small administrative staff and depends on manual data systems. To overcome these handicaps, the College needs continuity of staff together with reporting and record keeping systems to track data without major investments of time. The value of the electronic data systems might be considered. With or without more hardware, systematic procedures for collection and analysis of data and for the conduct of institutional research are needed.

The new administration has begun to rationalize the budget process for Bennington. Clear improvements have been made in the timing of the budget cycle and in the method of budget communications and evaluation. The new administration is planning to develop a multi-year plan which can serve as a basis for annual operating budgets and bring both consistency and rationality to the process. The plans for greater communication of budget status and issues to the faculty and to the Trustees are sound and can go a long way toward alleviating the current level of ignorance and the prevailing misconceptions about the sources and use of funds.

There is a need for more complete and systematic record keeping in personnel operations. The personnel policies for non-academic staff might be reviewed with specific emphasis on the establishment of annual personnel evaluations, in service training and procedures which assure equitable treatment.

The new administration understands very well that major deficiencies exist in financial accounting and control and the administration plans to make major improvements. Many of the weaknesses are noted in the most recent management letter from Haskins & Sells (dated October 20, 1977). That letter contains suggestions regarding accounting and record keeping procedures which should be implemented immediately. If these improvements are made the budget evaluation process will become easier and some savings may accrue from a new capability for tighter control over operations.

The Committee is not satisfied that college accounting procedures clearly distinguish discrete sources of funds such as federal funds, restricted fund accounts and capital fund accounts. Because of inattention to this area in recent years and the small size of the present staff, the retention of an auditing firm as consultants may be necessary.

The Committee observes that the College has built a strong academic program on a comparatively weak economic foundation. Many factors--a high tuition rate, a shrinking applicant pool, low faculty salaries, an inadequately funded library--threaten the integrity of the structure. The Trustees and administration understand these facts. Their response appears to be developing on three levels:

1. Improvements in current management and operating practices
2. The development of a five year master plan
3. Plans for a capital campaign

The first seems promising and is well under way. The second, a master plan, is in the formative stage. Arriving at a consensus on a master plan is difficult at a college which prides itself on individuality. In this instance, the future health of the College depends on the outcome. All constituencies have an appropriate claim to participate in the formulation of the master plan and, by the same token, the College has a claim on all constituencies to be enthusiastic supporters of the outcome. The Capital Campaign is seen together with increased contribution to the Alumni Fund as the funding source for much that is to be accomplished under the master plan.

Two other financial aspects reviewed deserve brief comment. Cash management appears to be adequate, and those improvements suggested by auditors, have been implemented. The management of the endowment does not appear to be aggressive and could be reviewed for:

1. Adequacy and frequency of review of investment strategy and portfolio mix
2. Potential for reductions in annual management charges
3. Closer and more frequent communication with the College business officer.